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ABSTRACT

Although vocational educators seem to be agreed on the priorities for their profession, research has found that the quality of vocational programs overall is highly variable and that the access of disadvantaged students to good programs is not ensured. The literature suggests that the challenges posed by new technologies and new clients, and a lack of effective problem-solving and decision-making strategies for managing change toward desired ends may be responsible for vocational educators' failure to achieve their objectives. A planning process which begins at the action-level and is responsible to local situations might serve as a strategy for realizing the potential of vocational education. The components of such a process would include the following: (1) define and prioritize the opportunities and challenges faced by the organizational unit over the next 6 to 18 months; (2) develop specific action plans to engage high-priority challenges and pursue high-priority opportunities; (3) set up controls in the form of periodic progress reviews to keep action plans on track; and (4) submit a financial summary as a cost-benefit analysis tool. This process, though demanding a new and unique approach to decision making, fits comfortably into existing institutional structures. (AYC)

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# VOCATIONAL EDUCATION -- THE RIGHT STUFF?

## PLANNING FOR RESULTS

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## Introduction

In the Winter 1983 issue of Change, the editor reports on a question posed to several vocational educators: "What are the priorities in the profession for this academic year?" The editor summarized the responses by saying, "It is interesting to note that many of the same priorities were shared by these . . . authors."[1] If this is the case, then vocational education must be about "the right stuff." Yet, when the National Research Council, at the request of the Department of Education, assessed the degree of cooperation among business, industry, community-based organizations, and vocational education in preparing people for tomorrow's jobs, their findings were shocking. ". . . the quality of vocational education programs overall is highly variable and the access of disadvantaged students to good programs is not ensured."[2] If we, as vocational educators, are in agreement about what needs to be done, then what has gone wrong? A perusal of current literature produces an interesting answer; while we know what needs to be done, our strategies for doing it are ineffectual. The purpose of this essay is to suggest a process for making "the right stuff" happen. As a vocational educator in a community college, my comments will be directed toward the post-secondary sector.

## Another Identity Crisis

About once a decade, community colleges are beset by an identity crisis. Vaughn suggests "The community college is reexamining its priorities, its resources, and its mission. However, [it is] failing to come up with definitive answers. Indeed, the community college is facing a crisis of identity that may prove to be as significant as any other event in its development."[3] The nature of the institution may be more significant than the crisis. Since its

inception, the community college has been at the cutting edge of socio-economic change. Today, technology is changing at an unparalleled rate. As a result, all Americans face the need for technological retraining at least four times during their careers. Many of them are turning to the community college as a source of new skills. The institution may be the first in society to be reflecting the emergence of what has come to be called the post-industrial age. In effect, the combination of new technologies and new clients taxes the creativity of any educational setting. What can be done?

## All Directions at Once?

The challenge is reminiscent of Leacock's character who ". . . flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."[4] Unless we are careful, our resources will be dissipated in a series of overreactions to symptoms. Anderson suggests that "In the academic world, . . . we . . . need to know which road to take, with whom, and at what time. We need to develop a variety of problem-solving and decision-making methods. And we need an understanding of people and work, with emphasis upon the conditions that bring out their best performance."[5] These elements may seem simplistic, yet they are more often honored in theory than in practice. In times of severe stress to the status quo, reinforcement of existing structures rather than attention to innovation is often the rule. What we, as educators, must be attentive to is strategies for managing change toward desired ends.

## The Change Masters

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Professor of Organization and Management at Yale University, conducted a survey of over fifty American companies which were managing change. They were prospering at a time when the nation's economy

was stagnating.[6] The characteristic shared by all which contributed to their success was a commitment to a unique planning design. "A well-managed innovating organization clearly has plans - but it also has a willingness to reconceptualize the details and even sometimes the overarching framework on the basis of a continual accumulation of new ideas . . . produced by its people, both as individuals and as members of . . . teams."[7] What is so unique about this design? Peters, co-author of In Search of Excellence, is quite succinct. "Planning can work, we first need to use it differently. Planning works best when it's radically bottom-up, and when it addresses issues instead of numbers."[8] A planning process which begins at the action-level and is responsive to local situations might serve as a strategy for realizing vocational education's potential.

Strategic Planning

Perhaps the secret of the unique planning system is its simplicity. Those organizations which use it indicate acceptance because it is seen as "simple, satisfying, relevant and helpful in their local situations."[9] The components are:

1. Define and prioritize the opportunities and challenges faced by the organizational unit over the next six to 18 months.
2. Develop specific plans of action to engage high-priority challenges and to pursue high-priority opportunities.
3. Set up controls in the form of periodic progress reviews to keep action plans on the track.
4. Submit a financial summary as a cost/benefit analysis tool.[10]

Is this all? The process is too sketchy; it doesn't follow the hierarchical, status-bound creations currently in use. True! However, it is psychologically owned by those who must make it work. Andrews Grove, President of Intel Corporation, says of the process: ". . . in general, the faster the change in the knowledge on which the business depends or the faster the change in customer preferences, the greater the divergence between knowledge and position power is likely to be."[11] Since community colleges in the late 1980's are faced with both of the types of change Grove describes, we do not possess the luxury of time. If we rely upon the traditional "trickle-down" approach to decision making, society will pass us by. Does the process demand the discarding of all current structure?

No! Grove describes a control design in use at Intel. It is systems oriented, using the decision as the output. ". . . decision making is likelier to generate high-quality output in as timely a fashion if we say clearly at the outset that we expect exactly that."[12] Intel uses six questions to structure the output of the decision-making system:

1. What decision needs to be made?
2. When does it have to be made?
3. Who will decide?
4. Who will need to be consulted prior to making the decision?
5. Who will ratify or veto the decision?
6. Who will need to be informed of the decision?

These questions fit comfortably into existing institutional structures. However, if taken seriously, they require a new and unique approach to the process. Those with the knowledge necessary to manage change will be involved from the

onset of planning. Further, they will have ownership of the decision-making process. Grove, Kanter, and Peters suggest that these variables are the essentials for success.

An Unreasonable Suggestion?

George Bernard Shaw said that "the reasonable person adapts to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable person."[13] We are about to enter into another cycle of "trickle-down" planning. It is likely to have about as much relevance as its predecessors. If we are to close the gap between the knowledge possessed by vocational educators and the success of our delivery system, something must be done. The National Research Council states, "We believe that some important and fundamental changes need to be made in the vocational education system if it is to do its job effectively."[14] Bottom-up, strategic planning is an excellent place to start!

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